CHAPTER THREE

‘DIRTY DANCING’ AND MALAY ANXIETIES: THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF MALAY RONGGENG IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Dedicated to the loving memory of Amin Sweeney, who devoted his life and soul to the study of Malay verbal arts and music

Introduction

‘Dirty’ in this combination with dancing connotes an ‘erotic, titillating, sexually stimulating’ quality of dance movements generally accompanied by music. It does not soil the dance floor or leave a big mess afterwards, but is envisioned to taint the minds and hearts of the participants and the spectators. As Mary Douglas famously contended, ‘dirt’ or ‘uncleanliness’ refers to ‘something out of place’, something that is not in concordance with a prevailing value system in a certain society or culture. Such a system of course is constantly under pressure of change, innovation and in need of modification to cope with new developments and experiences (Douglas 1985:36–40). Generally speaking, cultural systems are conservative in nature and will be consolidated by social agents in order to give a certain sense of stability to a community and confidence to its members. Authorities will attempt to gradually implement change, so that the texture of the society will not be affected and the people do not panic too much whenever they are confronted with the perennial cultural changes. However, time and again these attempts fail and outbursts of social anxiety may take place. Such upsurges of concern may be termed ‘moral panic’ referring to situations in which social practices or groups of people perceived as the instigator of such practices, are considered as the cause of (imminent) social upheaval or the ‘embodiment of evil’. Entrusted members of the society take their responsibility to eradicate such ‘evil’ and will then embark on a ‘moral crusade’ in the available mass media to save the society from perils and further moral degradation. To be sure, negative
interpretations of changes in a society not always emerge spontaneously as a response to such changes but may well be socially and culturally defined. These ‘moral panic attacks’ are launched by intellectuals and powerful social agents for specific purposes, e.g. to galvanize public support to prevent the society from sliding into a (perceived) state of moral decay, or divert attention from other problems, and take place in particular social contexts. These social agents will have their own agenda for pursuing their crusade and single out a certain group of people as their ‘folk devils’ (see S. Cohen 2002; Macek 2006).

In the first half of the twentieth century Malaya witnessed several outbursts of cultural anxiety that ostensibly were triggered by a global trend of popular culture emanating from and fuelled by a western entertainment industry that distributed their products through a global network of urban centres. This ‘global’ popular culture seems to have experienced quite a sudden surge in the interbellum period, also reaching the shores of the Malay World and spreading rapidly through its urban centres. This ‘entertainment wave’ enhanced the cultural and ethnic hybridity and cosmopolitan outlook that already existed in these urban centres, where members of Eurasian and Interasian groups were instrumental in absorbing global trends and localizing these in their own social practices (cf. M. Cohen 2001; Lewis 2009; Van der Putten, forthcominga).

A booming entertainment industry sprang up all over Southeast Asia propelled by new developments in audiovisual technologies making newspapers and magazines, gramophones, records, radios and later also sound movies affordable for large groups. Chinese transnational capital was largely responsible for the development of amusement centres where a wide range of forms – from Teochew operas to wayang kulit, boxing matches to ballroom dancing, film screening, circus acts etc. – was made available to large parts of the population: entrance fee was only 5–10 cents, but extra fees applied if one wanted to watch a movie, boxing match, theatre play or dance (see Yung 2008; Wong Yunn Chii and Tan Kar Lin 2004). These parks are considered to have been melting pots of different ethnic groups and provided entertainment to all cultures with their respective popular forms (Rudolph 1996).

The first few decades of the twentieth century witnessed a huge popularity of social dance practices spurred by the European and American ballroom dance industries. Southeast Asian social dance practices partly originate in itinerant professional female dancers accompanied by a few musicians, who performed at people’s homes or at the side of the road.
In the Malay Peninsula these ronggeng dances were incorporated into social practices at the courts where we find them described as part of official ceremonies. By the 1930s ronggeng had become part and parcel of a thriving colonial club and party culture, and became one of the popular attractions in the amusement parks.

In this chapter I will explore the social context of popular dance practices in Malaya of the first half of the twentieth century and analyse how this form of entertainment was received and reacted upon by members of the Malay community. As I have argued elsewhere (Van der Putten 2010), the Malay community went through a period of intensifying social tensions triggered by the influx of large numbers of immigrants, economic fluctuations, political emancipation and religious reformation, which led to a reconfiguration and reconceptualisation of Malay cultural identity. It seems reasonable to assume that a cosmopolitan, hybrid and wild aura of cultural practices distributed through the amusement parks was incompatible with a parochial attitude and an identity that championed modesty and was based on ethnicity and religion as promoted in the Malay press. However, we must also take into account that the Malay press was Islamic reformist in character with a particular cultural agenda and may have had a limited impact on social practices at large. By looking into three incidents that may be viewed as ‘moral panic attacks’ on the ronggeng dance practices launched from certain quarters within the Malay community, I hope to show how ronggeng was used by different social agents to further their cultural agendas, ranging from religiously conservative to politically modern or progressive.

Ronggeng

The practice of itinerant groups of professional dance-women and a few musicians in the Malay world has a long history, and in many regions we can find localized forms that are still being performed in new social contexts (Brakel-Papenhuyzen 1995; Spiller 2010:86–9). The practice is also known from the Malay Peninsula where it is commonly referred to as ronggeng or joget, and from the late nineteenth century described as a social dance of a few dancing-women performed on a make-shift stage where males were invited to participate for a certain fee. In the first few decades of the twentieth century it was integrated into a wave of commercial entertainment which created special venues where male patrons could dance with their favourite dancers after paying a certain fee per
dance; this phenomenon was called ‘taxi-dancing’.¹ The phenomenon of taxi dance halls disappeared in the 1960s and in present-day Malaysia ronggeng dances have been ‘sanitized’ of their perceived depraved moral connotations and ‘modernized’ to accommodate contemporary tastes to function as an identity marker for a multi-ethnic population. These changes to the dance practices do not seem to have been very successful as present-day ronggeng is considered to be a diluted form of the ‘original’ that is only performed at official occasions, tourist shows and international festivals. However, the music style of the dance and the songs that were performed to accompany the dance, now branded as ‘Irama Malaysia’, do seem to find a popular ear with the population as they are performed by stars such as Siti Nurhaliza (Tan Sooi Beng 2005).

As a social practice the dance of a professional dance-woman inviting males to participate was of course highly susceptible to criticism in any society as it is considered dangerous for the core of social structure, the family. The dance is also intrinsically erotic, which on a symbolic level may be described as an encounter of an uncontrollable passion embodied in the female dancer with the perceived restraint, reason and sexual prowess of the male. Spiller’s following analysis of a Sundanese ronggeng’s display of femininity eloquently captures this encounter:

_Ronggeng_ bind together the various elements of dance events by performing femininity in several sensory modes. Visually, _ronggeng_ accentuate their feminine attributes through extraordinary dress and grooming. Aurally, _ronggeng_ voices incite desire through melody and poetry. Tactilely, _ronggeng_ interact with men on a one-to-one basis, dancing in close proximity to – even touching – their partners. As objects of desire in multiple dimensions, _ronggeng_ force the male participants to make a choice: either to indulge their desires or to transcend them. (Spiller 2007:41–2)

Although most sources on the Malay _ronggeng_ stipulate that touching was prohibited, _ronggeng_ dancers were generally considered having low moral standards and easily offering sexual favours to their male clients. R.J. Wilkinson, the unchallenged authority on Malay language and culture, considered Malay _ronggeng_ a debased form of a Javanese original in which respectable Malay girls would not partake (Wilkinson 1910).²

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¹ This term was imported from the United States where this ticket-a-dance system had been dubbed taxi-dancing since the dancer would be paid for the time she spent on the dance floor similar to a taxi driver who would be paid by the passenger for the time in the taxi (Cressy 1997 [1932]:28).

² It does not seem very far-fetched to assume that Indian dancing girls, generally referred to as nautch girls in colonial literature, were in the back of his mind. Protestant
It is impossible to ascertain how, when and by whom *ronggeng* practices were introduced in the Malay peninsula, but I suspect that it may have been at quite an early pre-colonial stage when Javanese court traditions dominated cultural expressions in the Malay world. Around the turn of the twentieth century *ronggeng* performances were part of the palace culture of the Malay sultanates which one British reporter depicted as a nautch or *joget*, something rarely accessible to outsiders and quite different from the ordinary theatrical performances (*Mayong*) and the dancing and singing that went on during the Carnival season (*Boria*) (*The Straits Times*, 1 July 1898, p. 3). Around the same time *ronggeng* was also reported as part of ‘quaint customs’ of Malays during the annual Mandi Safar festival of Malacca, where the lady reporter seems genuinely overawed by the spectacle she witnessed at a beach near the town:

This is what we saw, and it was a wonderful sight too. One can picture the scene by an illustration: It is a coconut plantation, and there are scores of bullock carts, with good-tempered bullocks standing idly by unyoked. Each family claims the space of ground between four trees, and upon this, to a height of several feet, an encampment is formed of coloured stuffs of every description. Within the shelter of each of these – and they were numbered by hundreds – family groups, either women and girls, or very young boys and girls, danced either the boriah, joget, or *ronggeng*, their bodies undulating like the swaying leaves that formed a canopy high above their heads. We peeped into the nearest place for the medley of sounds that the Malay loves reverberated in the hot air. Here we saw a mother and her three daughters with the most sweetly serious faces, dancing the national dance. The girls were fascinatingly young, and in the four corners of the enclosure sat others playing, one a drum, another a concertina, a third a gong, with a polished brass [...] raised in its centre, and the fourth the Malay rebana. (*The Straits Times*, 13 April 1907, p. 7).

The ‘national dance’ she witnessed was *ronggeng* which by that time also had obtained a strong foothold in European, Asian, and Eurasian communities whose members celebrated Easter, Deepavali, football matches, birthdays, weddings, etc. with a *ronggeng* at night. From the welter of English-language newspaper reports one gets the image that no function would be complete without a *ronggeng* and that it had captured the colonial mind (Image 3.1).
3.1. How ronggeng captured the imagination of the colonial mind: a ronggeng dancer used to illustrate the letter R in a Dutch spelling book for children (Nieuw Indisch ABC / tekeningen van J. van der Heyden, 1925).

The last decades of the nineteenth century also witnessed a rapid increase in European, Australian, South and East Asian troupes touring the Malay world, where they introduced a commercial popular culture in the settlements that mesmerized substantial crowds of settlers and sojourners. It was the time when Chinese Opera troupes, Parsi Wayang groups and European, American and Australian Musical and Theatre companies and circuses toured the big urban centres of the British Empire. A local commercial entertainment network was established which was also served by local troupes performing hybrid forms such as
bangsawan, mendu, wayang wong, and mayong, in combination with ventriloquists, film screenings, circus acts and other elements of vaudeville theater.

Musical accompaniment was crucial to these forms, while dances were also part and parcel of boria, bangsawan and other forms. It seems only natural that the popular ronggeng of the function and party circuit would also be introduced into the entertainment wave that only was gaining momentum in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The heydays were still to come when amusement parks mushroomed in urban centres throughout the peninsula in the 1930s. In these parks the different forms converged and all were given its own venue: cinemas, stages for Teochew or Cantonese operas, Indian dances and Malay bangsawan, cabarets and ballrooms, restaurants and beer gardens, a place for fairground attractions, and a stage where ronggeng or joget girls would be waiting for their clients open for anybody to see who would have paid the 5–10 cents entrance fee.

Contemporary descriptions follow an entrenched racial division in the colonial society of that time between the cabarets, where most commonly Chinese and Eurasian women and girls danced foxtrots, charlestons, jitterbugs and tangos with their clients to western music, and the ronggeng stage outside where Malay girls would dance inang, asli, joget, and zapin, slow and composed at first, but after a while the rhythm would pick up.

The orchestra swings farther into its Oriental tango, the couples face each other, shuffle their feet, advance and retreat, but never touch. They sway from one end of the floor to the other, their feet beating staccato time to the music. The women hold their hands behind their backs, the men dance hands on hips. The drummer for the first time shows some animation. He starts to increase his hollow beats, sweat trickles down the face of the swaying fiddler. Louder and faster the drums are beaten and faster is the dance. The drums work up to an ear-splitting rumble, a roar of sound which continues for probably a minute before the drummer, without warning, drops into a slow, halting half-beat. The couples facing each other walk sideways with short steps, advance and retreat and shuffle again, and the drummer alters his time, quickly working up to a booming climax. In the last stage of the ronggeng, the dancers leap up and down, whirl round each other, hop on one leg, the violin wails above the throbbing of the drums, and the dance ends about one hour after it started with the audience more exhausted than the dancers. (McKie 1950:215–6)

McKie here gives a rather ornate description of a ‘traditional’ ronggeng performance by three dancers accompanied by two men on violin and drum. Professional bands in the amusement parks would have more
women and more musicians to accompany their dances who in the 1930s also started to play new tunes popularised by the record industry and films. Soon rumba, samba and conga rhythms would influence the ronggeng which after WWII transformed the dance into a new form known as joget modern stirring up quite a craze in the Malay peninsula (see below). In the new form of ronggeng popularised in the 1930s the dancers seem to have dropped the singing of impromptu pantun verses which became incommensurate with the shorter time of the songs due to the effects of their commodification through the record industry (Keppy 2008:153). In the traditional ronggeng performance the dancers would dance while singing pantun conveying possible amorous messages to which the male would cleverly respond in a mock battle of exaggerated femininity and masculinity. To be sure, such battles could easily transcend the dance sessions and result in amorous trysts and sexual relations. It may also be surmised that before such frantic encounters males would take alcohol to bolster their morale, which could easily lead to more agitation. Below I will discuss how ronggeng triggered moral scares and even panics within the Malay community as evinced by reports in the newspapers.

A Slip-Up by an Editor in 1920

Being a social dance charged with erotic tensions ronggeng could not but trigger criticism from conservative social agents. Above I already referred to Wilkinson who clearly did not consider ronggeng as a form of entertainment that could lead the Malay community into a modern era, a task he arguably had set himself to accomplish (Van der Putten forthcoming b). Ironically, the nearly thousand guests attending the farewell party the Muslim community organised for him at the Alsagoff family mansion at Bukit Tunggal were entertained with ‘mayong, main silat, wayang kulit, Indian dancing and singing and juggling’, and the perennial ronggeng (Singapore Free Press, 3 January 1916, p. 10).

It also seems ironic that Wilkinson’s criticism was quoted in a libel case against Sadullah Khan, a former editor of Utusan Malayu, in 1921. The editor was summoned to court by two high-ranking Malay citizens who felt wronged by letters Utusan Melayu had published in November 1920. They were reported to have financed a ronggeng party at the prestigious Sultan Suleiman Club in Kuala Lumpur which had evoked the anger of the unnamed letter writers. In his defense Sadullah Khan stated that he had
fallen ill one day and had gone home leaving instructions for the foreman to publish an editorial about ronggeng. He stated that the foreman erroneously published the letters instead, ostensibly not knowing that they contained grave insults to the two plaintiffs. So far I have not been able to consult these letters, but we get a glimpse of their content in one of the newspaper reports about the court case, which needs little elaboration: ‘among Mohammedans anything connected or associated with pigs was extremely offensive’ (The Straits Times, 19 November 1921, p. 10). Also Sadullah’s editorial on ronggeng remains a mystery but it cannot be very complimentary to the dancers as in court he vented his opinion that all ronggeng were prostitutes and organising a party was harmful to the Islamic faith (The Straits Times, 7 December 1921, p. 7). But Sadullah’s defense was to no avail and he was sentenced to paying the costs of the proceedings as well as the demanded compensation of $1,000.

Most interestingly in this otherwise quite unrevealing case is that a subscription was started by a Muslim organisation because Sadullah Khan was unable to pay the compensation. After a few months a total of $802 was raised by members of the Anjuman-i-Islam organisation, a reformist Ahmadiyya club that had been established after the visit of the Muslim missionary Khwaja Kamaluddin to Singapore in 1921 (The Straits Times, 4 January 1922, p. 9; Singapore Free Press, 30 March 1922, p. 3). Another member of this organisation that predominantly had its members from Jawi Peranakan circles, was Muhammad Yusuf bin Sultan Maidin, who a year later would launch his own attack on the popular dance and theatrical performance boria in Penang. In two self-published booklets he expounded all the woes that this performing art form originating in Shi’a rituals was causing among the Malay youths in Penang and other areas where boria had become popular (Van der Putten forthcoming a). Although Sadullah’s alleged slip-up, as well as Muhammad Yusuf’s well-planned attacks may have failed to curb the popularity of perceived morally degrading theatrical forms, these efforts galvanized a certain moralizing stance about popular culture among reformist Muslims and Malays in general.

The Woes of Women and the ‘National’ Malay Dance

These first attempts to spur support for such an ‘anti-performance movement’ were certainly still remembered a decade later when we find indications of a more deliberate attack on ronggeng. This incitement of a
moral scare was published in two consecutive installments on the front page of the periodical *Saudara*, which was established by the well-known Sayyid Sheikh al-Hadi and edited at the time by the famous journalist and short story writer, Abdul Rahim Kajai (see Wan Abdul Kadir 1988:131–3 and Van der Putten 2010). Kajai provided prime newspaper space to someone with the alias of Islam al-Din who starts his attack by referring to Muhammad Yusuf’s books 8 years before and a fatwa three Penang-based ulamas issued against *boria* in 1920. He expresses his surprise that *boria* received so much attention while the ‘national’ dance which is much more harmful to the Malay people hitherto has escaped the attention of any of the authorities. ‘Boria is only once a year (in the month of Muharram), but my mother’s group (*kaum ibuku*) is much more at risk from the consequences of *ronggeng* and, if neglected, may produce bastard children as unbelievers lead the *ronggeng*-women astray’. He further argues that *ronggeng* may disrupt family relations when the wife and children want to visit a performance and the husband cannot hold them back. At such a party most Malays stand outside at the fence to see how the *ronggeng*-women dance with (Peranakan) ‘Chinese, Christians, Whites and Blacks’, and perhaps a few invited Malays. The mainstay of the Malays cannot afford to organize a *ronggeng* party while the Malay *ronggeng* women are lured into debauchery by infidels who give them alcoholic beverages. Clearly then, he states, *ronggeng*-women are engaged in prostitution which is a blemish on the Malay ‘nation’ (*bangsaku*). Why do none of the other races act as *ronggeng*-women or have such a dance, if it was not harmful? Indeed, the westerners do have mixed dancing but only in certain secluded places and never other races are allowed to join in. ‘So why does my people still allow such practices, how ignorant and debased are the Malays that they do that?’ (*Saudara*, 21 March 1931, p. 1)

In the second installment he continues by referring to a few innocuous pantun texts sung by *ronggeng* women which he feigns to misunderstand, before rhetorically asking them if they don’t realize that they are an embarrassment to the Malay ‘nation’, and if they know of nothing else to do for a living. Next come Islamic advisers, justices of the peace and other respectable members of the Malay community who are summoned to take measures, for ‘if they are not punished all of them (*ronggeng* dancers and their assistants) with severe punishments, inevitably the Malays will perish in the near future’ (*Saudara*, 28 March 1931, p. 1).

The most obvious anxiety expressed by Islam al-Din is that the Malays would be swept away from their own homeland if they did not brace themselves against the onslaught of aliens who had flocked to the
Peninsula in previous decades. The Great Depression with its worldwide economic regression and subsequent mounting tensions along fault lines in societies, also seems to have served as a catalyst for the development of political awareness and new economic ventures of Malays. Based on articles in Malay reports found in the Malay periodicals Saudara and Majlis, I have argued that in the reconfiguration of cultural practices in the 1930s Malay intellectuals seem to have reserved no place for ronggeng due to its intrinsic eroticism, whereas the theatrical form bangsawan successfully gained access to a ‘new’ Malay culture (Van der Putten 2010). The bangsawan repertoire was modernized during this period from staging (foreign) fantastic stories with fairies flying through the air to more realistic and perhaps moralistic Malay plays that taught spectators parts of the glorious history of the Malays. At least this is the impression one gets from reading these periodicals owned and used by groups of reformist Muslim agents who for sure influenced public opinion to a certain extent but were in no position to make big changes in Malayan society.

The role of these reformist groups was diluted and surpassed by market forces and measures taken by the British colonial government, whose policy was to protect Malay rights and implement affirmative action to enhance the economic position of the Malays who were also urged to develop strategies to improve their situation themselves. One of the fields open to them was the burgeoning entertainment industry which did not require any formal education and could bring fame and wealth to some of the highly talented amongst them. These are reasons why we find a relatively high concentration of Malays among the people involved in the industry, while transnational capital provided the financial means for its surge in the 1930s.

The entertainment industry became further commercialized by the increased availability of new media such as the gramophone, radio and films. These media had a profound influence on the popular music and ronggeng-dances that were increasingly mixed with non-Malay rhythms and melodies. The radio and record industry not only popularized but also standardized them in the sense that the texts became fixed and the length of the songs was dependent on the time recordable on 78rpm records, instead of pantun that could be made up at the spur of the moment and elongated to accompany the movements. In the amusement parks the ronggeng-women would be paid per dance which had a certain time limit of 3 minutes that paralleled the time a standard song would take, crooned by a lady singer through a sound system (cf. Keppy 2008:153).
By the end of the 1930s ronggeng had clearly transcended dance practices per se, and had also become a music genre that would be broadcast on the radio in special programmes (see Radio Malaya programme in Singapore Free Press, 27 March 1939). It had also mixed with other rhythms and was performed in shows together with other ‘genres’, such as boria witness the following announcement of the ‘Penang Borea Carnival Show’ at Happy World in Singapore:

Exhibiting Borea ‘Karangan’ & Choruses. Special Extra Turns and Comic Entrees, latest Kronchongs and Stamboels by the ‘Penang 4,’ Special Singings with appropriate music accompaniment. Introducing Misses Hasnah and Moona, the Young and Beautiful Ronggeng Sisters, Penang’s famous Highly-Paid Favourites who will sing New Songs and also give Exhibitions of Modern Ronggeng and the latest ‘Volcano’ Rumba dances. (Singapore Free Press, 9 June 1939, p. 7)

**Joget Modern as Site of Contestation**

Although the above announcement does mention the term ‘Modern Ronggeng’ performed by the ronggeng sisters, Hasnah and Moona, post-WWII reports in the English-language press without exception report that a new form of ronggeng or joget, generally referred to as joget modern or modern joget, suddenly sprang into being in 1949 in one of the clubs in Kuala Lumpur. Apparently the king of kroncong Ahmad CB in tandem with the legendary violinist Hamzah bin Dolmat introduced these Malay dances to rumba and samba rhythms in Singapore (Webb Jones 1953: 78–9). Subsequently, a craze swept the Peninsula during that year causing quite a stir in public opinion with the usual conservative religious distrust of such a new form. However, this time conservative anxieties were countered by a flurry of reactions from Malays and others instilled with a new confidence and enthused by a fervor of a new post-war age. Below I will discuss these reactions but first I will give a few quotes from newspapers reports about the craze that swept over Malaya.

With an acute sense of drama a certain Ken Jalleh reported about ‘Ratna’ who had recently become a joget-girl, and also gave information about how the new form came about and what it had changed. He reported that for ages the ronggeng had not changed but then suddenly a new development unfolded:

[…] new Latin American rhythms swept post-war Malaya. Malaya everywhere got the craze for sambas and rumbas – and the popularity of their
national dance declined sharply. Ronggeng proprietors, going broke, sought for new ways of attracting patrons, but without changing the atmosphere of the Malay ronggeng party. First, they improved their music. More musicians were added. Rhythms changed gradually. Then suddenly, the conquest was complete. Rumbas, sambas and congas invaded the ronggeng. Modern joget was born. [...] There are at present five modern joget halls [in Singapore]. Two in the New World, one in the Great World, one in the Happy World and one at the new Lunar Park at Geylang Serai. The proprietors are reaping a good profit. In the days of the old ronggeng, a 10-minute dance cost 40 cents a dance. Today in the modern joget, each dance lasts about three minutes – but the cost remains the same, 40 cents. The penari is paid at 15 cents a coupon in halls which have the coupon system. Otherwise she is engaged on a fixed rate of $5 a night irrespective of how [many] times she dances. Musicians earn from $3 to $5 a night. (The Straits Times, 2 October 1949, p. 8)

The same year the traditional feast at the end of the fasting month was celebrated in Happy World with modern joget and a costume contest attended by hundreds of Malay youths:

So popular has the modernised ronggeng become that a second platform was set up this week and 10 more girls were employed to cope with the demand. Two special rhumba bands each with a crooner and a dance band leader are now accompanying the ronggeng dancing. [...] One of the girls, Ning, said that all the girls preferred it to the old-style ronggeng which was danced with a three-piece band comprising a ronggeng drum, a gong and a violin. 'Dancing to rhumba rhythm comes naturally to Malays' she said. 'It is very easy and the Malay and Chinese men get much more kick out of it than out of the old ronggeng.'

In the Malay pondoks (clubs) costume competition at the New World last night, four of the six teams wore immaculate white sharkskin double-breasted suits. The General Manager of the New World, Mr Lin Bock Chye, said the Malays were ‘going American’ in their dressing. ‘We meant the contestants to wear full Malay gala dress and had expected there would be interesting points of comparison in the traditional dress of such groups as Boyanese, Javanese and Straits Malays,’ he said. Of the two teams in Malay costume, one wore songkoks and the other tanjaks. Tonight six more teams will parade and the results of this, and other competitions, will be announced and prizes (cups, radio sets and sarongs) will be awarded. (Singapore Free Press, 28 July 1949, p. 5)

Unsurprisingly, this rage met with concern and anxiety from conservative Malay quarters such as the Chief Kathi, the highest Muslim authority of Singapore, Tuan Haji Ali, who considered it a ‘bad moral influence on young people’ which would pose a social problem. The Malay Union woman leader Che Fatimah said that the government should promote the
original form of ronggeng to prevent youngsters from neglecting their studies (The Straits Times, 23 September 1949, p. 3). The controversy was triggered by Inche Sardon bin Haji Jubir, a person of political authority as member of the Legislative Council of Singapore, who had suggested that joget modern should be banned in Singapore because of the effects on Malay school children who were ignoring their obligations because of the dance craze. Quite an innocuous and well-intentioned admonition it seems but surprisingly it triggered a flurry of irritated reactions from readers who judged the new dance a sign that Malay youths had finally adopted modernity, or considered it just a temporary fad that would not affect the moral condition of the Malay community – still, pawnshops were doing good business apparently. These commentators vented harsh criticism to Inche Sardon’s suggestions as they would put joget-girls out of their jobs. Ronggeng-women themselves were given an opportunity to ‘speak their mind’ and told their legislative representative to ‘lay off’ and tackle some serious problems. Ronggeng-women, such as Che Putih, a widow supporting two children and her mother, and Che Latifah, a housewife with three children, were presented as persons making an honest and honourable living from dancing. If joget modern were banned the only option open to them was to become a waitress in a coffee shop, or worse (The Straits Times, 25 September 1949, p. 3; The Singapore Free Press, 16 September 1949, p. 5). After a few weeks of similar reports in the English press as well as the Malay Utusan Melayu chiding the Malay representative in the Legislative Council and ridiculing him in two cartoons, Inche Sardon (Encik Sa’dun bin Haji Zubir) sent a letter to the Singapore Free Press claiming that he had never suggested that joget modern should be banned only that it could be bad for school children and that regulations surrounding amusement parks should be strictly observed so that they would not allow under-aged children to enter the dance floors.3

No, refuted Inche Sardon, he was a modern young Malay guy, how could he have argued against joget modern? What he had done was to question and protest against the opening of a new amusement park at the grounds of the Great Eastern Trade Fair in Geylang Serai, because it was in the middle of a Malay area and could therefore affect the surrounding Muslim population more than other parks in Chinese areas. Purportedly to prove his point he organised a joget modern at his house for a Malay

3 Some time later there are indeed reports about a ban for 11-year olds in Bukit Bintang Park in Kuala Lumpur, and a 12-year old girl in Penang who paid for her education by acting as ronggeng-girl (The Straits Times, 4 November 1949, p. 4; and 5 August 1951, p. 3).
Union tea party, but tellingly enough nobody wanted to dance and after playing two sambas the band and dancers packed up and left (*The Straits Times*, 18 October 1949, p. 4).

It seems quite clear that the English language press together with the nationalist and rather progressive *Utusan Melayu* tried to quell this surge of cultural concern to safeguard the commercial interests of the entertainment industry. Among Malays the protests seem also fuelled by a desire to take part in the modern world after the war. Some reactions stirred up by Inche Sardon’s ‘storm in a teacup’, as he called it himself, defy the moral implications of it:

This modern *ronggeng* is but symptomatic of the time: a time in which Malay wear sharkskin jackets and bow ties instead of sarong and baju, and young Malay women run and jump and play hockey instead of sitting demurely at home engaged in needlework. This samba-cum-rhumba variation of a traditional dance form is an inevitable reaction to the time and place in which young Malays now live, a time and place in which Western influence is paramount. (*Singapore Free Press*, 24 September 1949, p. 4)

The Malay youths as a group adopted modernity and showed it in their dress and leisure activities, a new confidence seems to have taken root in them which may have something to do with the political and social revolution that was going on in the much admired Indonesia. Also, ‘women of ill-repute’ were given a voice in the press and their interests and rights were allegedly being protected. A social welfare officer in Selangor was reported to be quite active in taking care of them as she tried to stop girls under the age of 17 to become joget-girls and even to form a trade union after they first had taken religious classes (*The Straits Times*, 29 June 1950, p. 7, and 22 August 1950, p. 4).

This controversy around *joget modern* and the *ronggeng*-women’s morality was not only expressed in the newspapers but also in Malay films that were produced in Singapore and in Malay short stories and novels that poured out of Singapore and Penang. Below I will discuss two examples of the opposing camps in this dispute, both were meant to join in the commotion around *joget modern* and influence public opinion in a more ‘nuanced’ and certainly elaborate way.

**Literary Reflections**

After the war the popular press in the Malay peninsula was revived with vigour to publish a host of new magazines, newspapers, and short novels.
Two main players in this post-war revival were Syed Abdullah bin Abdul Hamid al-Edrus (aka Edrus and Ahmad Luthfi), and Harun bin Muhammad Amin (aka Harun Aminurrashid), who would both play active roles in the forming of public opinion in volatile Singapore public life through the many periodicals and novels they published during the next decades (cf. Barnard and Van der Putten 2008). Edrus was a ‘rather’ controversial author who got some of his books and periodicals burned in a public gathering of members of UMNO in Johor, led by the future prime minister Tungku Abdul Rahman, because they were considered to describe erotic trysts too openly. Being a staunch reformist Muslim Edrus wanted to attract attention of as many people as possible (especially youngsters) to social ills, so that they became aware of these and would deal with them. Through the sales of these popular novels he financed his other publications predominantly comprising instructions to be a good Muslim and the history of Islam. He was very prolific and is renowned for authoring 24 novels in the time of 18 months which he dictated to his secretary to keep up production. The fastest novel he wrote was Empat kali haram (Four times haram), written in 11 or 15 days and published as a counter attack on the mufti of Johor who had issued a quadruple fatwa on his book entitled Janda (Divorcee): which was judged haram to buy, read, use and write. In the book Edrus under his penname Ahmad Luthfi relates the story of a sanctimonious religious teacher in Johor who basically marries every girl he meets and divorces every fifth wife, as Muslim law does allow men to be married to four wives at the same time. Another title in this collection of 24 books was published in October 1949 and deals with the dance craze in the newly established amusement centre, Lunar Park, in the middle of the Malay quarters Geylang Serai in Singapore. This Geylang Serai karam (Geylang Serai going down) contains the story of the 16-year old school boy Ali who one night attends the dancing at Lunar Park, dances 12 times with the same girl, Maimunah, falls head over heels in love with her, can’t sleep, can’t concentrate in school, and needs to go to the joget modern stage every night to dance and take Maimunah out. In need of money and already having pawned his new 50-dollar sharkskin suit, Ali steals money and a watch from his father who finds out and punishes him severely. His mother and grandma protect him but the situation goes from bad to worse, and eventually the family breaks up. Being unable to cope with his family life anymore the father leaves, and his son is caught transporting guns for a burglary and is convicted to 8 years in prison.

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4 See Van der Putten 2007 and The Straits Times, 23 October 1949, p. 5.
Ahmad Luthfi indicates two reasons that are the basis of this sad story: The character of Maimunah who is depicted as a mature woman (though no details are given about her age or personal background) toying with the boy, taking his virginity and feeding on his youth, strength and vigour so that she will be ‘forever young’:

Maimunah was anxious not because she was angry but because she was interested, knowing how rude and clumsy men were who had no experience with women. She had decided to make Ali her victim, because some of these older people think that they will become young again if they have sexual union and follow their urges with young people. [...] Maimunah got up and looked at Ali walking away, thinking that it would not be long before she would consume her prey.5 (Ahmad Luthfi 1949:60–2)

Basically this lewd femme fatale turns the young and naïve Ali into a virile, drinking dance-addict who eventually pays dearly for his obsession with imprisonment during which time he turns religious. The author unfolds this stereotypical plot to expose the social woes that an amusement park in the middle of a Malay kampong will cause, which is the second basic cause for the drama unfolded in the novel. The dance craze is at a high and every night people flock to the park to watch the dances, meet friends, and have a drink and some food. Most of these people are Malays who are not well off, and youngsters who want to show off in their best clothes to find out a partner, of course, illicitly as the proper religious rules are not followed. Another group consists of school kids who stay on till very late, gather and are involved in all kinds of mischief. They also have free access to the joget modern stage, alcoholic drinks and other things haram. Of course, this will severely disrupt their education, wreck the family and perpetuates the destitute situation most Malays live in. Cabarets do not allow underage youngsters access to their premises and this should also be implemented for open-air joget modern stages, Ahmad Luthfi argues in the introduction and epilogue of the book. He also calls for measures to be taken by the municipal authorities to revoke permits for the park and close it down as the people he interviewed in the neighbourhood are all

5 The translation is mine from the following original: Maimunah geram bukan kerana marah tetapi hatinya telah terpikat mengetahui kekerasan dan kekasaran mereka yang baharu hampir kepada perempuan itu. Dan dengan yang demikian tentulah pikiran-nya Ali akan menjadi korban kaudanya kerana telah menjadi sifat kepada setengah2 lelaki dan perempuan berpendapatan apabila mereka yang telah tua atau yang telah berumur sedikit dapat bersedukukan mengikut kemahuan tabi’i dengan orang yang muda itu, maka kononnya badannya terasa muda juga. [...] Maimunah berdiri memandang sahaja Ali berjalan itu dengan hatinya bahwasanya masanya telah hampir yang Ali akan menjadi korbannya.
very upset. This call apparently did not fall on deaf ears with Inche Sardon who purportedly asked questions in the legislative council about the park and joget modern around the same time.

In Minah joget moden (Minah a joget modern girl), published in early November 1949, the author Harun Aminurrashid takes quite a different, much more positive stance on joget modern, although he is certainly not uncritical about the social problems caused by the rage. Harun who also in the periodicals that he edited and published tried to galvanize support for Malay artists so that the art scene could serve as a high-quality modernizing force in society, as he claimed was the case in well-respected Indonesia, gives a more balanced picture of the dance craze.\(^6\) The novel tells the story of Rosminah, a girl born in a family with a grandfather who worked as stage director of a bangsawan theatre where he taught Rosminah all the dancing, and a devout Muslim mother, who raises her by instilling fear in her about how sinful and doomed the artistic scene is. Minah marries a cousin on her mother’s side in a happy marriage blessed with two children. But soon her husband falls ill, Minah can hardly get by from the money she earns from sewing, and her family does not give any help. Some of the neighbours are more inclined to give her some financial aid, especially the joget girl who lives next door. This joget girl also persuades her to come to the stage and Minah starts to work as ticket seller but soon her talents as singer and dancer are discovered, she becomes a joget girl and earns enough money to take good care of her family. Of course, the members of her extended family as well as most people in the community look down upon her and call her a lewd sinner. But Minah does not give in to the temptations that come with the job, and stays faithful to her husband and family. She escapes the attempts of molest by a rich Arab businessman who coveted her since he first saw her (he is killed by another joget dancer) and another assault by someone from the joget modern at her house. After some time her husband dies, and after three years she remARRies another respectable man who appreciates the art scene and the artists for what they are. Still she retires from the joget modern to care for her husband and children.

Clearly Harun promotes his mission to make the people see that not all joget-girls are the vamps who feed on young males as described by Ahmad Luthfi, but can be very respectable people. However, he does not deny that there are all kinds of problems with joget modern which entails more

\(^6\) See Barnard and Van der Putten 2008 on the influence of Indonesian art and literature on developments in the art scene in Singapore.
social freedom for the youngsters. He also advocates a much more positive view on *joget modern* that may provide an earnest living to many women who may fall victim to lascivious men, here in the person of the lecherous Arab Sayyid – a topos in Malay literature of the late 1930s-50s – who is killed after trying to grab Minah. Clearly the message here is that the rights of *joget*-women need to be protected, so that they can further develop their trade. The author also argues that the *joget* is a means for Malay youths to express and channel their energy. The dance should be developed into an art form that is definitely Malay in character, albeit influenced by western dances. Below follow some quotations of the speeches by Mat Biola, the leader of the *joget modern* troupe and Minah after she won the first prize in a contest:

[Mat Biola:] *joget modern* is an art form of mixed Western and Eastern parentage. I do not wish to ruin our own art and culture by introducing the new form, but intend to fashion the aspirations of the youngsters who want change and are not bored with our virtuous art and culture. I hope the *joget modern* can prevent our hungry-for-change youths from hurling themselves into forms like Western dances [...] in our eyes it doesn't look right that Easterners go for [Western] dancing and it goes against our traditions and religion when an unmarried couple embrace each other in public [...] Our youngsters wish to be happy and strive for solid changes equal to the youngsters in this atomic age, therefore it is not right to look down upon and disparage the creations of Malay artists. (Harun 1968:92–3)

[Minah:] ... not everyone has the talent to become a true artist and therefore I hope that you do not look down upon our artists. I hope from now on you will support their efforts. If you do not improve their situation and appreciate their achievements, surely the foreign people will mock the efforts of our nation even more. (Harun 1968:94)
Conclusion

It seems impossible for social dance practices not to draw a controversy in mass media in any type of culture – examples from the West are abundant. Some social agents will deem a practice ‘out of place’, i.e. ‘dirty’, others will find it in concordance with modern values that the people need to address or embrace. In this chapter I have looked into the controversies surrounding ronggeng or joget and considered them in the framework of moral panics or scares as developed by Cohen in relation to social upheaval in Britain of the 1960s. Technically, perhaps, only the controversy around joget modern qualifies for this model as there is a flurry of responses in the press about its introduction and sudden immense popularity. However, I have shown that in the mass media of the Malay Peninsula conservative forces launched earlier attacks on the ronggeng-dances, music and especially female performers which purportedly were motivated by religious and moral purification, but certainly also by a political agenda as Malay intellectuals felt the need to counter increasing pressure of big immigrant communities and the economic downturn of the beginning of the 1930s. These early attempts on moral scares clearly play up the dangers of social interaction between Malay women and men from other faiths and races, although doubtlessly there were cases that ‘Malay fears’ were proven right. I think it is reasonable to conclude that in the 1920s and 1930s the attacks had little to none social consequences in the society at large as the anxieties were expressed by a relatively small group of religious conservatives. After WWII traces of conflict became much more apparent when an issue raised by conservative quarters triggered strong reactions from members of the Malay community inspired by economic motives and nationalist feelings. These liberal Malays considered the dance practice as a sign of modern, youthful energy, the impetus behind major social and political changes in Southeast Asia, such as the Indonesian revolution (1945–49), which seems to have had a profound impact on left-wing Malay intellectuals. Indonesian artists were instrumental in cultural developments in the Malay peninsula and some of their revolutionary spirit must have inspired their Malay brothers and sisters to welcome the call for change and embrace a sonic and kinetic modernity.
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